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AUTHOR HUGHES, ANNE E.
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ABSTRACT

IN A STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR OF "HEAD START" PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, THEIR PARENTS, AND THEIR TEACHERS, RESEARCHERS TAPED AND ANALYZED THE PHONOLOGY, GRAMMAR, AND VOCABULARY OF THESE THREE GROUPS AND THEN INTERVIEWED THE TEACHERS TO DETERMINE THEIR CONCEPTS OF THE CHILDREN'S AND PARENT'S LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES. TEACHERS RECOGNIZED SUCH PROBLEMS AS DELETION OF FINAL CONSONANT STOPS (/D/ AND /T/) AND THE USE OF DOUBLE NEGATIVES, BUT FAILED TO RECOGNIZE THE LANGUAGE SYSTEM OF LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS AS AN ALTERNATE, WORKABLE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION. THE STUDY REVEALED THE TEACHERS' NAIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE AND THEIR NEED FOR WORKSHOP EDUCATION IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL RELATIVITY TO DEVELOP UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT FOR DIFFERENT SOCIAL SYSTEMS. SUCH TEACHER EDUCATION COULD THEN BE APPLIED IN THE CLASSROOM, E.G., BY THE USE OF "SWITCHING DEVICES" IN WHICH THE PRESTIGE DIALECT IS PRESENTED AS ONE OF MANY POSSIBILITIES OF EXPRESSION. A NEGATIVE OR CORRECTIVE ATTITUDE IN THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE ARTS SERVES MERELY TO INHIBIT THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD AND TO CLOSE OFF TEACHER-STUDENT COMMUNICATION. (MF)

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LINGUISTICS FOR THE ELEMENTARY TEACHER

Anne E. Hughes
Supervisor
Language Education Department
Detroit Public Schools

Every elementary teacher in the nation would like to feel that she is helping children to enjoy and appreciate the language to which they are born. If those same teachers were to sequentially verbalize the teaching of the English language, they would acknowledge the process is one of thought to the spoken word to the written symbol.[1] Within the scope of this process, however, something happens which often retards the fluency of imagery, speech, and writing: that retardation we could call fear, inhibition, disinterest, mental inertia or just plain boredom!

A possible solution to this linguistic phenomenon is suggested to the teacher by an imaginative village schoolmaster who says we teachers must "regard language as a means whereby the child may honestly, sincerely, and unaffectedly express his own opinion, his own feelings, and -- thereby -- his own inviolable and unique nature, so far as he has discovered it at a particular moment of time."[2]

Of interest to the elementary teacher is a recent study of the language behavior of pre-school children in the Head Start program, their parents and

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[1]Hertel, Smith, and O'Connor, Creating Clear Images (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fideler Publishing Company, 1966).

[2]Vicars Bell, On Learning the English Tongue (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1953), p. 21.

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their teachers. The purpose of this investigation was to determine certain socio-linguistic phenomena in the vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar of disadvantaged pre-school youngsters, their parents and their teachers and to describe aspects of the language of these children and adults in terms of educational implication. In order to accomplish this end certain disadvantaged pre-schoolers in the Head Start program, their parents and their teachers were selected as speech informants. The speech of these three groups was taped so that certain phonological, grammatical and vocabulary items could be transcribed and analyzed at a later date. A second interview was conducted with a sample of the teachers who served as informants in the first interview as well. The purpose of the second interview was to determine the teachers' concepts of the language problems of the pre-school children and their parents. Their reactions to the speech of the children and their parents, both from their personal classroom experiences and after listening to a tape of the children and their parents, were also recorded so that the implications of the teachers' attitudes could be studied at a later date.

This linguistic study used the research techniques of the Linguistic Atlas Project and included the biographical data of its informants. The data tabulated were: the informant's age, his sex, his race, his academic experience, his birthplace and the birthplace of his parents, paternal and maternal grandparents, his residences, his travel experiences and his occupation, all of which contributed to the speech information, and pointed to some indices of social stratification in the language of these informants.

The study discovered that the teachers' concepts of the language problems of the children were correct in some instances and incorrect and incomplete in others. Some teacher-informants vaguely identified such matters as, the deletion of the final consonant stops /d/ and /t/ correctly. Examples of these deletions were noted in such words as:

	don't	eight	hurt	hot	can't
	light	heart	west	out	point
and in:	bird	red	playground	cold	
	bad	dad	good	food.	

Of the potential occurrences of the final /t/ in the speech of the children there was a 79 percent deletion of /t/ and 21 percent realized occurrence of this sound at the end of a word. In the case of the final /d/ in the speech of these same children, approximately 50 percent of the time the /d/ was deleted. An interesting aspect of this same /d/ deletion was discovered in the data of The Detroit Dialect Study[3] which studied the speech of older children and adults in this same geographical and socio-economic group. This larger study found that children ages 9 to 12 in the lower socio-economic class delete the stop consonant simple /d/ in the final position--if the next word has a consonant in the initial position. An example of this would be:

bad boy or cold night

Twenty-four percent of all final /d/'s are substituted with /t/, in the speech of the lower socio-economic class, as in:

record or salad

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[3]Roger W. Shuy (Director of the Socio-Linguistic Program, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.), The Detroit Dialect Study, 1967.

but this phonological phenomena is found in only 5 percent of all final /d/'s in the speech of the upper socio-economic group.

Another phonological discovery of the Head Start study was the substitution of /n/ for /ŋ/, but it was not understood by the teachers that this substitution takes place at times in the middle-class speech as well as in the speech of the lower-economic level speaker; this is not always a social class marker.

The teachers in this study were disturbed by the use of "seen" rather than "see" in the grammatical system of the child, but failed to recognize that this may be a phonological item rather than a grammatical one. Grammatical items in the speech of the children were identified by an analysis of the data; the teachers were much more concerned with vocabulary than grammatical usage, however. Noted in the data were the following:

1. The various "s" inflections - as in:

   I likes books

   He says it

   I can works

   They gots the same teacher

   I go everydays

   my's cousins

2. The double negative -- as in:

   He don't know nothing or I ain't got no food

The larger study, The Detroit Dialect Study, as well as the Head Start study are one of the clearest social markers in grammar. Among children 10 to

12 years of age, 55 percent of the lower socio-economic group used the double negative in contrast to 0 percent of children from the highest socio-economic group. The percentage was even higher in the class of adults from lower-level groups.

3. Pronoun redundancy - as in:

my sister she wants

our baby he cries

my mamma she buys

and the: 4. "Done" perfective auxiliary - as in:

my brother done got

Mamma done gone for a barbecue

In terms of educational implication, the grammatical items identified are of prime importance to the teacher; it must be understood that most vocabulary differences may be an importation from another region of the country and that this is not in and of itself good or bad for that reason. Grammatical usage, on the other hand, can prevent a man from adequately functioning in a society which accepts the prestige level speech as that of the educated man.

It is important to know that social classes influence language and that speech is determined by the social community of which the individual is a member, not the race or ethnic group in which he is born.

Finally, the data of the study reveal naive attitudes toward language and a lack of understanding of the disadvantaged on the part of the teacher, whose

identification with disadvantaged speech is hard to analyze because of her guarded use of language in the classroom.

It is claimed that the elementary teacher can make use of linguistics, for the teaching-learning process is one of clear-thinking and discovery and this is the study of linguistics in its finest definition. The typical elementary language arts classroom throughout the country today uses the integrated language arts approach to the teaching of the skills and appreciations of the language, but does not concern itself with just how we communicate and how language works. At the pre-school and primary level there is some emphasis on the oral approach to language, but not nearly enough. In the work of Kohl, it was discovered that the child from the lower socio-economic level, in particular, can talk and write freely, but fears.[4] Traditionally, too, the teacher's approach to the teaching of the language arts is a negative or corrective one. In such an atmosphere, the child from the disadvantaged home, which does not usually produce the normative school language, does not try to communicate with the teacher.

According to the Detroit speech investigation, the teacher could not identify specific speech problems of her class. The majority of teachers imagined that the child could not or would not communicate because he lacked "words." A few others suggested that the children and parents did speak freely with each other, though they lacked adequate vocabulary. What

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[4]Herbert T. Kohl, Teaching the "Unteachable" (New York: New York Review, 1967).

the teachers failed to see was that the child and the parent did communicate with and without the use of words, but that their means of communication was simply not understood by the school staff. The teachers spoke a different level of language and did not recognize the language system of the lower socio-economic level speaker.

This research suggests the need for workshop education of elementary teachers in two areas:

1. Cultural relativity - which would be a sociological study in depth which would guide the teacher to an understanding and respect for different social systems, other cultures, other racial and ethnic groups - without forming moral judgments of different peoples. Perhaps this sort of preparation will lead language arts teachers to recognize the various social structures of language as well.

2. The Nature of language - which would provide knowledge to teachers in the area of language problems first in order to do something about them later, learning what problems are most crucial, and finally, teachers should learn to describe language in terms of:

(a) Phonetics

(b) Grammar

(c) Syntax.

One of the questions that occurs to the elementary teacher who decides to do some "Action-Research" within her own group of children is:

> When I have studied the speech of my youngsters and have described the phenomena in such a way as to identify certain phonological and grammatical items in their language, how

should I treat this knowledge in the classroom?

There are three possible choices: (1) as item drills in which each item is taught in isolation and drilled on consistently and periodically; (2) as pattern practice drills in which there is a presentation of language patterns in oral practice in the classroom; (3) as switching devices in which the prestige dialect is taught in such a way that the child learns that there are linguistic choices that each individual must make for himself and that this choice depends upon the circumstances in which the person finds himself. Identification and the description of the language precedes this method of language instruction and is therefore the method which meets with the favor of this investigator.

Fortunately, for children of the nation, more and more of the teacher education institutions now require language courses for the elementary teacher in-training. A few of the institutions provide courses in the history and the nature of language, phonetics, and lexicography. With the growth of such courses, the elementary teacher, always considered a generalist in the field of language, would be better prepared to understand and work with the child who needs training in the use of his language; the disadvantaged child needs this language skill in particular.

Let us never forget the first implementer of curriculum change and development, the classroom teacher herself. The teacher must become positive rather

than negative in her approach to the teaching of language behavior. Through the data discovered in our investigations in Detroit in the Head Start program and The Detroit Dialect Study, it was found that the teacher approached the language problem with sympathy and resignation, but with little outward hope of teaching success in this area. Knowledge is confidence and only with a knowledge of language and children can the teacher hope to be successful in her instructional efforts.